

Performing Work without Doing Jobs

By DANIEL MARSCHALL

ABSTRACT: Plant closings and the widespread disappearance of industrial jobs have severely strained the American labor movement. To successfully recruit the millions of workers in service and other expanding occupations, some observers have proposed that unions adopt a form of occupational unionism that would seek to unite members around the sort of broadly conceived work that they do rather than the narrow job duties they perform at a specific work site. This article looks 10 years into the future. It presents an interview with a fictional labor leader who has embraced the model of occupational unionism, contributing to a dramatic revival of union size and influence. It is impressionistic and suggestive, not comprehensive. It is a blending of fact and fiction based on the author's projections of how advanced technology, skill-related initiatives, and research findings in cognitive science could contribute to a resurgent labor movement. The two government programs cited, skill standards and the school-to-work initiative, are real, in their early stages of evolution.

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NOTE: This article represents the personal views of the author and his interpretation of current affairs. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the AFL-CIO or its affiliated unions.

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CENTURY CITY, California (7 May 2005)—For us baby-boomers drifting into our golden years, it is practically a dim memory: the traditional 9-to-5, full-time, single-office-or-factory-location, commute-to-work-every-morning job. The last decade has witnessed a radical transformation in how work gets done, not to mention the role that working plays in our daily lives. Thousands of industrial factories have closed their doors, decentralizing into multiple agile business units networked with fiber optics and coordinated by chip-resident intelligent agents. Telecommuting is the norm. The integrated entertainment industry has bloomed into the major sector of the economy. Government statistics show that 62 percent of the labor force now works part-time, is self-employed, or qualifies as contractors or contingent workers. The number of persons with full-time jobs, primarily top-level corporate managers, continues to dwindle.

All of this, of course, is old news, the culmination of global workforce and economic trends that accelerated at the end of the Cold War. The digital libraries of the two major telecable networks are filled with interactive stories about the difficulties individuals have had dealing with these vast trends. Most interesting these days is how various institutions are coping with these changes, struggling to adapt and survive in one form or another. In this context, nothing is more striking than the revival of organized labor. From a stressed-out institution in the 1980s, under sus-

tained attack by outside political enemies and suffering from the loss of millions of industrial jobs, the unions have come roaring back to life. Who would have thunk it?

While the roots of labor's resurgence remain a hot topic of debate, observers agree that the organization and rapid spread of occupational networks was an important factor. Central to this development has been Cynthia Morovcek, currently executive coordinator of a network of retail employees. We caught up with Morovcek the day before what may be her crowning achievement: the founding convention of a diversified federation of occupational network unions, the United Network of Professionals (UNOP). Exhausted but invigorated, barely holding back a stream of demands for decisions from anxious aides, Morovcek gave us an hour to review the past and contemplate the future.

Q: The last time we talked in any depth, two or three years ago I think, you were smarting from criticism by certain political activists and other union leaders who were still charging that your retail network was not a real union, more of a social service agency to give benefits to low-wage workers and prop up little firms always on the verge of bankruptcy. Now those critics are silent and you are looked on as the new-wave leader of a postindustrial labor movement. How does it feel to beat out your opponents?

MOROVCEK: Well, I don't really see it as one side beating out the other side. You've got to view these things in historical perspective. The

structure of the American economy, actually the whole global economy, has changed profoundly in the last, say, 150 years. Work performed according to particular crafts was dominant when early unions were founded. Unions of craft workers were the mainstays of the early labor federation, and the barons of growing manufacturing industry were dead set against their factories being organized, at least until the depression, the upsurge of mass production workers, World War II, and the growing power of central federal government authority. At that point, and for a number of decades, industrial unions were the powerhouses. It was understandable, you know; many of my union sisters and brothers saw these two models of unionism, craft unions and industrial unions, as the principal vehicles for defending the interests of their members. Our disagreements were based on sincere concern for our members, differences about how to cope with rapid economic transformation.

Q: Looking back, how do you explain the unfolding of those trends?

MOROVCEK: As usual, there were a number of factors—economic, social, technological—that came together. One was the rise of the service sector. Health care, retail, business services, computer software, education, maintenance of telecommunication networks, government services—all of these industries grew and absorbed more and more workers. Simultaneously, manufacturing firms adopted advanced technology at a faster and faster pace. They reengineered, restructured, and right-

sized—and displaced millions of blue-collar workers accustomed to their narrowly defined, traditional jobs. Those were the scary days. It was not that long ago that serious observers of economic trends saw a time when jobs would almost not exist, when massive numbers of people would be unemployed and unemployable because high technology and computer-mediated processes and paperless offices were doing everything. Now we can see what was going on. Sure, traditional *jobs* were disappearing. But massive *work* still needed to be done, partly to repair the destruction wrought by the abuses of an industrial society.

Another big factor was social: the movement of women back into the workforce in huge numbers, along with their determination to balance the demands of work and family, the home front and the work front. That meant flexible work schedules and bouts of temporary employment, while retaining the right to make significant contributions to their chosen organizations. For men, especially your baby-boomer types, it was being fed up with the hierarchical, dictatorial, bureaucratic way most organizations were run. They were thirsty for greater autonomy, with self-employment and the creation of microbusiness ventures as a realistic alternative.

Then the real impact, I think, was made by young people, those baby-echo kids who saw few permanent jobs available and managed to adapt with the help of some creative government programs. They are the first generation to be truly comfortable with computers and interactive me-

dia. To them, mastering the technology and moving from employer to employer, while still cultivating an occupational identity, was no big thing. Occupational unionism was a natural fit for them.

Q: I never have grasped this “occupational identity” thing and the emphasis you put on it. Really, these are kids working in tiny shops where there is a great deal of turnover. How important could occupational identity be at this stage of their lives?

MOROVCEK: Listen, I’ve spent many years working closely with the kids who still don’t get the proper respect for the sort of work they’re doing. I am constantly amazed at how well they have been able to adapt and mature in a chaotic society where change is perpetual, morals and values are constantly shifting, and technology leaps forward at a rate that no one can understand. We’ve had a great deal of success recruiting young people in high school, presenting our program to them in understandable—and respectful—terms, and hooking them up with mature role models in the industry. They start working part-time and have access to adults who care about them and are sincerely interested in conveying the cultural richness of our industry.

What’s most exciting to me is how our training programs, the ones that combine work experience with industry knowledge and positive social and interpersonal skills, have been able to compete and provide a real-life option instead of going straight to college. I know of many students who graduate from the university and

flounder around for years trying to decide what to do with their impressive-sounding degrees. Our young members get started on an honorable career in a growing industry where they make decent entry-level wages and the salary potential, long-term especially, is excellent.

We’ve also had good success in our COP Centers, our Community of Practice Centers, where young people can hang out and talk with their peers about work experiences and even trade information about job openings and what’s happening with this or that store. Multimedia reports are available there on a variety of current issues. They can easily access our Organizational Memory Archive. Considering that the media still look down on retail work, you would be amazed at the sophisticated stories that get swapped at these neighborhood centers, most having to do with how to improve customer service or get a handle on the latest inventory tracking software. There is a tremendous body of knowledge and expertise among these kids. And worldliness: they don’t hesitate to move to another store if the boss mistreats them or they see the opportunity to advance their skills.

Out of all the services that our members receive for their monthly dues—the usual occupational network benefits of health care coverage, insurance, credit cards, travel, Web access—I think the COP Center environment is the most popular with our young members. We call it “cultivating occupational identity.” Our young members find it cool and comfortable, a place where their ideas are listened to and where they can gather infor-

mation that can have an immediate impact on their lives. It's also where many of our training programs are held.

Q: I understand that you recently shut down several of your COP Centers and that you've been experimenting with some new technology. What's going on?

MOROVCEK: For a few years now, we've had a COP Center in every major city. Actually, those centers were mainly administrative hubs, the location of our Web servers and a few desks for mobile staff, along with the hangout space. For a center director, a big part of his or her job was facilitating community-of-practice exchange among the members in many locations, you know, cybercafes and shopping malls and various community centers. In essence, a center was a hub of often dozens of little groupings formed by friends or corresponding to different segments of the industry and different neighborhoods. Center directors don't *control* these activities. Instead, they *enable* them to happen and provide services when needed. In several areas, the autonomous groupings are where the action is, so we closed the centers and are servicing the groups at a state or regional level. We are very flexible about the evolution of the centers and are constantly evaluating and assessing the structure.

The technology thing is really interesting. All of our members have their career subnotebooks with the usual array of multimedia capabilities, lots of flash memory, and a UHS [ultra high-speed] modem to jack into the Web from anywhere they can ac-

cess the NII [National Information Infrastructure]. They have their training and skill upgrading MO [magneto-optical] mini-disks they can use to download and store material. Their personal Web sites sit on our COP Center servers, often in automatic interaction mode. (It's their choice whether to be in automatic interaction or passive mode.) They leave video messages for one another constantly. We've been testing this software that sits on the server and pops up as a kind of virtual hangout space, a more realistic, super-3D version of the Shared Virtual Space tools pioneered by Enterprise Integration Technologies in the late 1990s.

So, we have these virtual spaces that members can enter from remote locations, check out who else is there, interact while in video mode, catch up on union announcements or notices from the hiring hall, leave questions for staff, and so on. These are like virtual COP Centers and are becoming more and more popular, especially among suburban members. Considering our odd working hours, these virtual hangout spaces are essential for some members to keep in touch with their associates and the entire occupational network. We're looking closely at the role that this virtual space will play in the future, even having electronic union meetings.

Q: Going back for a moment, back to your big-picture trends, you mentioned technology as one of the driving forces for occupational unionism. Did that have a big impact?

MOROVCEK: Of course it did, although I think of technology more as a force that enables things to happen,

changing people's consciousness along the way about the full range of possibilities. (Let's not get deterministic here!) Anyway, there were the economic trends in the growth of the service sector, social developments in the movement of women into the workforce, and baby-boomer rejection of oppressive structures—and then the fuel that advancing technology spread on the fire.

Once the fiber optic infrastructure was in place, videoconferencing surged in popularity and more businesses embraced telecommuting as a good tactic to hang on to their most talented employees. The traditional office environment became practically dysfunctional. People could use their subnotebooks to work from their home, car, or hotel room, exchanging information and conducting business in real time with clients and customers worldwide. Speech recognition devastated clerical jobs. Language translation software, at least once it was perfected in real-time mode, truly transcended national boundaries. There was less and less need for people to meet physically to do their jobs.

But, human nature being what it is, we still hungered for social time, time to get together with one another and socialize and enjoy that one-on-one exchange of energy. It was only logical that people working in the same broadly defined occupations would want to spend time with one another, preferably in low-stress kinds of settings. In effect, the distinction between work and play began to break down, along with the split between work and learning. Basically, the development of occupation-centered unionism, a commu-

nity of interest that meets the tangible needs—personal, social, and economic—of the new service worker, emerged naturally from this confluence of developments.

Fortunately, the labor movement was flexible enough to forge new structures and adapt. We looked back in labor history to our finest traditions and went from there. It was just a matter of rediscovering our roots and actively experimenting with new programs in line with the potentials of new technology and the sensibilities of new generations of workers. Remember: we always said labor was flexible and adaptable. We've been matching reality to the rhetoric.

Q: You also mentioned government programs. What was their role?

MOROVCEK: There were two programs that made a difference. One was the so-called school-to-work initiative that took off in the mid-1990s. It was clear by that time that the vast majority of growing service jobs didn't really require a college education. In fact, a rising chorus of employers began complaining about how college grads had inflated expectations and had absorbed a lot of worthless abstractions and then needed to be retrained once they got into a real workplace with the latest technology. Yet our whole system and society—guidance counselors, parents, telecable sitcoms about the fascinating fictional lives of professionals, and so on—pushed kids to believe that unless they had a university education, they were somehow worthless. Untold thousands of young people would start college, drop out, and be even more discour-

aged about their lives and futures. We were heading for disaster.

It was the school-to-work movement that broke the college-only cycle. After the historic *America's Choice* report in 1990, the federal government, and then state after state, implemented creative programs to develop careers in the numerous skill areas that didn't depend on four years of liberal arts education. The programs gathered considerable momentum after a few years, and they have now become an accepted part of our education and training system. For us, school-to-work programs opened up high schools to skilled practitioners, trained through our union and joint labor-management training trusts, who could come in and demonstrate that meaningful work opportunities existed apart from college. This ended up to be a big boost to our long-range organizing.

Q: Wait a minute. I thought the unions hated the school-to-work initiative. Weren't the unions very skeptical about its chances for success?

MOROVCEK: True, there were problems at first. Once again, you had some insensitive government officials, along with some small non-profit groups, that put these ideas forward as "youth apprenticeship," a wrong-headed term that put the building trades on edge—you know, they were thinking, "Here comes another ill-considered government boondoggle that's going to undercut joint apprenticeship." Those misunderstandings were worked out, and numerous unions at city and state levels got very involved in linking the

schools to unionized, high-performance workplaces in various sectors.

After all, who has better access to highly skilled, experienced workers who can serve as the mentors that school-to-work efforts find so essential? Who has better access, if not the unions, to the advanced network technicians that keep the NII humming? In particular, once the NAMWU [North American Metal Workers Union] came together in 1999 and pointed its considerable resources in the school-to-work direction, the supply of skilled workers for advanced manufacturing systems became plentiful.

Q: What was the other government program?

MOROVCEK: The second one with big impact was skill standards. I know, the National Skill Standards Board (NSSB) has encountered some serious criticism. It took them a while to really get rolling, but once they did and certified broad skill standards in major occupational clusters, this led to a historic shift in how we view jobs in our regional trading bloc. Almost single-handedly, the skill standards initiative killed those old, divided-up, Tayloristic sorts of narrow job categories, especially when combined with O*Net data being easily available on the Web. [O*Net was the first iteration of the interactive, multimedia version of the old Department of Labor's *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*.] The Skill Standards Board set the model for effective postindustrial government programs; you know, pull together the major sectors—and don't even think about excluding

unions—develop voluntary systems that meet the needs of both employees and business units, and then facilitate a wide range of strategies and experiments and organizational approaches in using the standards.

In some ways, although I would not go overboard here, our occupational networks were one of those experiments. Our retail network can be traced back to the broad skill standards developed by trade associations and unions in the commercial sector. In that sense, our roots go back to the Gingrich years. We still appreciate the work of the NSSB and strongly supported its reauthorization in 1999 and 2004.

Q: As always, I'm impressed with your grasp of history and the evolution of all these ideas and new approaches. Earlier you alluded to the labor traditions that you and other occupational unionists drew from. What were the major influences here?

MOROVCEK: Actually, I was sorting through some boxes in preparation for our unity convention and came across an old reading list that we used in the late 1990s to put together our first "Introduction to Occupational Networks" training class. Here's a copy.

What's critical, again, is to view all of this in the context of the debate in the mid-1990s about the massive destruction of jobs. People were all over the place on the supposed shape of future trends. The economy was a crapshoot; month after month, chaos seemed to rule. One corporation after another kicked people out of their jobs. In bad times, they used layoffs

to save money. In good times, they used layoffs to improve their so-called competitive position. When times improved, they worked people overtime rather than take on new hires and incur the cost of benefits. Wall Street hung the sword of stock prices over everyone's heads, with slick takeover artists ready to move against vulnerable firms. This was the hostile environment we were dealing with.

Many professionals with huge personal investments in education and long job tenure—engineers in high-tech manufacturing, for example—lost their jobs and had a hard time finding comparable work. Professionals and white-collar workers thought they were secure in the middle class; they began to experience what blue-collar factory workers had gone through in the 1970s and 1980s. In many instances, women became the primary breadwinners in families. A large contingent of men and women took the opportunity to become consultants, start their own businesses, or return to school for specialized education.

At the same time, the drumbeat of personal responsibility was heard throughout the land. Democrats and Republicans, corporate leaders and media opinion makers, all picked up on this ideology that individuals had to assume personal responsibility for their careers and their work futures. The days of relying on the big-daddy corporation, or the big bureaucratic organization, for steady employment were at an end. Either you took charge of your own career or you had no employment security. None what-

soever. Some took this individualistic perspective to an extreme, not recognizing that government also has a responsibility to help bootstrap the disadvantaged and dispossessed. But all that was denounced as outmoded liberal thinking.

So, you put the movement toward self-employment together with the focus on personal responsibility, and people began to identify more intensely with a particular occupation—broadly conceived as professional work, thanks partly to the skill-standards initiative—and to look for continuous learning and upgrading opportunities. Also, the findings of cognitive science—the importance of experiential knowledge and learning in context and becoming part of a culture of common practice—became widely accepted and translated into training programs. All of this opened space for occupational unionists to begin organizing. Have I gone off on a tangent? What was the question again?

Q: Traditions, traditions. What were the labor traditions you looked to?

MOROVCEK: Right. A major one focused on women, specifically waitresses who organized and were real powers in labor from the early 1900s through the 1960s or so. Dorothy Sue Cobble of Rutgers has written some great stuff about how unionized waitresses—at one point, they had one-quarter of the workforce as members—were the superstars in the “theater of eating out.” They saw themselves as a “craft sisterhood” that worked to advance the status of their occupation. A lot of restaurants

went along because they realized that the waitress unions were their best assurance of a skilled, responsible labor force. Essentially, the waitress unionists managed themselves and made sure that their members met certain standards of competence. (Doesn’t that sound familiar!) The unions provided training and a measure of employment stability. The members also benefited because the system allowed them to move in and out of the active workforce more easily.

It was Dorothy Cobble’s studies of waitresses, and the implications she drew, that opened our eyes to a new labor typology, one that saw multiple models of unionism being applied to different segments of the workforce. In other words, basic union principles could be maintained in different structural forms, from the craft unionism of the building trades, to the industrial unionism (or what Cobble calls worksite unionism) of advanced manufacturing, to the occupational unionism of service workers and others.

Q: That experience sounds kind of old. What about some more contemporary examples?

MOROVCEK: There are modern examples, of course. Some are tied directly to our new United Network of Professionals. Again, one concerns women, this time clerical workers in offices. These jobs grew very rapidly for several decades after World War II. In the 1970s, the 9-to-5 working women’s movement helped these women fight for rights and respect. But clerical jobs took a dive with the arrival of computer technology, speech recognition, and male profes-

sionals *finally* understanding that they needed to do their own word processing. Although the number of jobs dropped, there continued to be a demand for skilled staff to coordinate office functions, add hyperlinks to electronic documents, and synthesize information from the Web, Microsoft Network, and other nodes on the NII. Former clericals and secretaries rapidly dominated this emerging, broad occupation, gaining highly marketable skills they could take anywhere. Once my old friend Karen Nussbaum finished her tour of duty as head of the Women's Bureau, she moved quickly to organize the American Network of Office Coordinators and Information Technologists. We're very pleased to see it become part of our UNOP coalition.

Another interesting historical development concerned technicians, a rapidly growing part of the labor force that maintained its momentum and became pivotal to the smooth operation of the information superhighway. As I understand the history here, going back to the 1970s, outside vendors began to take more and more work from union members in hooking up telephone lines and installing networks in various companies. Some of those vendors stayed small, you know, local or regional subcontractors, but others became the giants we know of today. The unions moved to organize as many of these subcontractors as they could, integrating the new members into their locals and experimenting with the most pertinent services. This was all before divestiture in the early 1980s. Once divestiture hit, everything was

up for grabs. Both AT&T and the regional Bell operating companies (RBOCs) moved to reengineer and cut costs, and that meant job loss for a lot of skilled union members.

So union leaders looked at the situation and developed some creative responses. Most notable, I think, was their hiring hall for members, coordinated with upgrading and retraining programs, and then their neo-apprenticeship program for installation, repair, and maintenance technicians. They started with those programs as experiments in a few cities, but then the programs really took off when some of the RBOCs expressed interest. Union leaders also hooked into the school-to-work initiative and designed some really sharp and innovative links with all kinds of education and training institutions. Actually, this is a good example of how an occupational unionist approach can be successfully implemented inside of existing union structures. The unions' hiring hall system is flourishing—not only in the United States but also in Canada, Mexico, and spots in South and Central America—along with their advanced technology training programs, distance learning projects, and customizable multimedia tools. We are working with them to transfer some of the COP Center technology we discussed earlier.

There are a number of other traditions that I'm not really going to have time to get into right now. An example is the garment and textile workers' unions with their aggressive promotion of quality products and industry expansion, their use of engi-

neers to give technical assistance to small firms, and their creative multi-employer bargaining approaches.

Not to mention the building trades. I've been very pleased over the past decade or so to see how revisionist historians have gotten people to understand the insights and progressivism of the long-standing crafts; their leadership in training and skill-upgrading programs has been a constant inspiration to us. They have been very open in sharing their experiences.

And, of course, I can't neglect the arts and entertainment unions that have promoted employment security and professional recognition for their highly mobile members through flexible compensation schemes, unique dues structures, and various benefits and career advancement opportunities.

People doing all of these kinds of work, whether or not you call them jobs, have found the practices of occupational unionism to be responsive to their needs, especially when you sprinkle in some of the concepts of associational unionism that some academics put forward in the 1980s. Obviously, I could go on and on here.

Q: Okay, I know I have to let you go. So you have more than 3000 delegates gathering here tomorrow to raise the banner of occupational unionism and shake everyone up. How are you going to control all of these

folks and get them moving in the same direction?

MOROVCEK: Well, you know me well enough to know that I have no intention of exercising control over all these folks. We've put a good agenda in place, with addresses by some supportive political leaders—including an interactive teleconference session with the president—and a combination of topic-oriented workshops and intensive division meetings broken down by our occupational clusters. Roger Schank and his folks from the Learning Sciences Corporation are here to record more members' work experience and add the stories to our Organizational Memory Archive.

This is really just the start of a long journey. When I think back, I'm very proud of the fact that organized labor was able to grapple with the supposed death of the job in a creative, flexible manner. I see this unity convention as absolute confirmation that there are three vital, healthy models of unionism, with our brand only the most recent. I know our structures will change as we move ahead. I'm confident that we have something for everyone. In fact, what about you high-flying freelance cyber-journalists? Our information and applied knowledge networks are second to none. I think I have an interactive magneto-optical promotional disk you might want to take a look at. . . .